



GSU Assessment Newsletter

"What and how students learn depends to a large extent on how they think they will be assessed. Assessment procedures must send the right signals" (Biggs, 1999).

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Learning Outcomes Assessment—Year 2

Kudos to departments and faculty for their work in compiling the initial round of Learning Outcomes Assessment reports. It is evident that most departments worked hard and thoughtfully to evaluate their students' learning. As we move into the second year of university-wide assessment of student learning, we will be focusing on making the process more effective and efficient.

As you may recall, the focus of our assessment efforts is to document that we have a "culture of assessment" at GSU and that we use assessment results to improve the quality of student learning. Of course, we have been assessing students (and assigning grades) since the beginning of the University. What's different about this process is that we're demonstrating that we have a process in place in which the assessment of learning is transparent (so others can know how we assess and improve) and aggregates the results so that program effectiveness can be assessed.

The assessment reports for 2004-2005 have been reviewed and some navigational elements added to the reports that will assist readers to find desired sections when they are posted on the web. Also, we want to keep the reports behind a password with access limited to approved GSU users. There are a number of exemplary reports currently available for which the departments have granted permission for us to share their good practices. These assessment reports are featured on the assessment website:

<http://education.gsu.edu/ctl/outcomes/outcomes.htm>

For this year's reports (2005-2006) we will introduce a web-based reporting system that was developed at Virginia Commonwealth University. The system, WEAVE Online, uses drop-down menus and text boxes into which departments can paste the various components of their learning outcome assessments. This will streamline departmental reporting and enable the university to compile reports on student learning across colleges and departments. It also make all assessment reports secure, while permitting access by the program, department chair, and appropriate deans.

Assessment Goals for 2005-2006

- Introduce the use of WEAVEonline, the assessment management system which enables academic programs and administrative units to enter and revise their own assessment reports.
- Increase the number of undergraduate programs which assess all seven GSU general education learning outcomes.
- Increase the proportion of students whose learning is assessed in all undergraduate and graduate programs.
- Increase the number of programs using a metric for judging students' performance, e.g., 5-point rating scale (5 highest-1 lowest).
- Set program goals and standards for student performance each year based on the assessment results from the previous year (e.g., we expect majors to score at least 4.0 out of 5 on mastery of content knowledge and 3.0 of 5 on written communication).
- Increase the number of programs reporting both the assessment of typical performances (e.g., the mean was 3.7 of 5) and the proportion of students falling below the program's standard for each learning outcome (e.g., 15% of students scored below 3.0).

For questions or assistance, contact Harry Dangel, hdangel@gsu.edu or 1-0126

A Quality Enhancement Plan

GSU is due for reaccreditation by SACS in 2008, and requirements have changed since our last reaccreditation. In order to maintain our accreditation, we must comply with two principle requirements: Submit a Compliance Report which includes multiple years of assessing student learning and implement a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which is an initiative that the institution will undertake to *improve student learning outcomes*.

Georgia State's QEP will focus on the assessment and continuing improvement of two general education outcomes: Critical Thinking and Writing. Departments are already assessing these two outcomes as part of their annual student learning outcomes assessments. The QEP will be different from the annual assessment process in that it will provide a structure whereby writing in undergraduate programs will be the vehicle for developing critical thinking in the discipline rather than assessing them as separate outcomes. Through writing, both faculty and students have explicit evidence of critical thinking skills. Writing also provides the medium for targeted feedback to improve thinking and reasoning and for documented changes in performance.

Critical thinking and writing skill are already evident in the learning outcomes expected by departments and already expressed in assessment plans and reports. The genre for evidence of critical thinking and writing might vary from students writing policy memos to doing research papers, from writing analyses of laboratory results to writing papers which demonstrates being able to evaluate evidence and take and defend a position based on that evidence. Programs with similar definitions of critical thinking would share strategies and information about resources on using writing to promote critical thinking.

Yes, it's SACS and something we need to do as part of reaccreditation—but it is a good thing because the QEP process will provide additional resources to increase the number of writing intensive courses required to promote our students' learning.

General Education Assessment Update

For the past two years teams of faculty, subcommittees for assessing general education outcomes, have been planning and conducting assessments of the GSU general education learning outcomes in the core. Below is a brief summary of the process the subcommittees used to assess general education learning. More detailed reports are available at : http://education.gsu.edu/ctl/outcomes/Gen_Ed/Gen-Ed-Home.htm.

Written Communication: Writing samples from social science courses were scored using a scoring rubric with six criteria: purpose, content, organization, details/evidence, tone and mechanics. Each area was rated on a six-point scale from excellent to poor. Recommended criterion is a score of 4 (good).

Oral Communication: Using online rating scales from the National Communication Association and in class ratings of presentations, students in Speech 1000 were rated on the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension and Willingness to Communicate Scales and Competent Speaker rubric.

Collaboration: Descriptive data from rubrics and surveys were used to indicate whether and how much students understand the process and benefits of collaboration as part of their learning process for writing.

Critical Thinking—Science: Students in Area D courses were assessed to determine if they could formulate appropriate questions and testable hypotheses for research; effectively collect appropriate (empirical) evidence; apply and integrate principles and concepts to analyze problems within specific core areas; appropriately evaluate and interpret claims, arguments, evidence and hypotheses; use the results of analysis to appropriately construct new arguments or alternate hypotheses, and formulate new questions. **Critical Thinking—Humanities:** California Critical Thinking Skills Test was given to students in selected humanities course as post-test only format. The Sub-Committee recommends using an alternative format for future assessment.

Analyzing Contemporary Issues: Students were assessed on questions embedded into examinations of selected social science courses and the percent of students scoring 60% or higher on the targeted questions was tabulated.

Quantitative Skills: Assessments were adopted from the Mathematics Association of America and include being able to: interpret mathematical models, such as formulas, graphs, tables, and schematics, and draw inferences from them; represent mathematical information symbolically, visually, numerically, and verbally; use arithmetical, algebraic, geometric and statistical methods to solve problems; estimate and check answers to mathematical problems in order to determine reasonableness, identify alternatives, and select optimal results; and recognize that mathematical and statistical methods have limits.

Technology: Skills for using technology were defined as discovering and learning how to use campus computer facilities (labs, student.gsu.edu, GoSolar, the aquarium etc.); doing academic research online, including Boolean search operators and evaluating the validity of sources; designing and building web texts that display knowledge of usability and navigation as well as a clear understanding of the separation of form from content; writing, sharing and reviewing documents online, using MS Word's commenting features and using email.

In December the Committee on Academic Programs of the University Senate approved a policy change that would provide the departments with teach courses in the core with the responsibility and authority to assess the general education learning outcomes in their courses. With this change, departments will be cognizant of any needs to modify instruction. Over the next several months, the Subcommittee will be providing departments with technical assistance and support for assessing general education outcomes in their core courses.

Assessment Practice to Share (and some to avoid)

Most programs at GSU have settled on using a 5-point scale for judging students' performances (5 high-1 low) vs. a yes/no reporting of whether students met a standard. With the 5-point scale, a standard can be set for both minimal performance (e.g., students must score at least 3.0) and targeted goals (e.g., goal of an average of 4.0 for all graduates) and progress toward that goal can be assessed (e.g., an assessment report might state, "the mean score on the rubric for demonstrating mastery of content knowledge in ... was 3.85—well above our standard of 3.0, an improvement from our mean of 3.7 last year, and progress toward our goal of a mean of 4.0"). A simple "yes-no" decision (e.g., all students passed the examination) doesn't provide a clear metric of "how well" or a point of comparison across the years.

For many programs, there is a professional accrediting group whose standards must be met. The expectations of these groups have increasingly become aligned with the requirements of SACS to assess student learning. The more we can integrate these processes, the more meaningful and viable the assessment process will be.

A learning outcomes assessment is different from the program assessment process that many of us have used in the past. In program assessment we examined "input" factors (e.g., reviewed syllabi, documented books in the library, described qualifications of faculty, etc.). The learning outcomes assessment focuses on the results—what knowledge, skills, and values did students' learn. And, the best way to evaluate student learning is through embedded course assessments, aligned with the specific goals and objectives of the program.

Many programs which don't have capstone courses or required culminating experiences or requirements have been discussing the potential value of such a requirement. Certainly, having a course (or requirement, examination, thesis, etc.) at the end of a program of study, provides an excellent instructional opportunity for students to integrate and apply the knowledge and skills learned in the program, as well as an opportunity for faculty to evaluate and reflect on the impact of the program on students' learning.

Check award winning departmental assessment reports: <http://education.gsu.edu/ctl/outcomes/outcomes.htm>